

## The Exploration of the Mississippi Gulf Coast and the Formation of Hancock County

By

Charles H. Gray  
Executive Director  
of the Hancock County  
Historical Society

The city of Bay Saint Louis overlooks the Bay of Saint Louis, the Mississippi Sound, and ultimately the Gulf of Mexico from the highest waterfront elevation on the Gulf of Mexico. However, this beautiful little city is not the first cultural center to occupy this prestigious location. The exact date when Native Americans first arrived is veiled in the mysteries of time, but it is certain that they occupied this land for thousands of years before the brothers Iberville and Bienville arrived to claim it for France in 1699.

The oral history of the Indians that was passed down through generations both fascinates and gives us endless sources for speculation. Every question answered brings a dozen more elusive than the last. However, with the Europeans, there is somewhat more documentation available for research.

In the late Fifteenth Century the pagan world had been divided by Pope Alexander VI between Portugal and Spain with Portugal controlling Brazil and Spain controlling nearly all of the rest of both North and South America. However, being unable to settle these vast continents



Jean-Baptiste Le  
Moyne, Sieur de  
Bienville,  
French adventurer  
who explored the  
Bay of Saint  
Louis and its sur-  
rounding area

effectively, Spain guarded the Gulf of Mexico from several islands in the Caribbean and from St. Augustine on the east coast of the Florida peninsula.

In 1535 the French explorer Jacques Cartier explored the St. Lawrence River Valley in Canada, but France was unable to occupy the area until 1604 when a settlement at Port Royal, Nova Scotia, was established and was followed in 1608 by the settlement at Quebec.

When affairs in Europe permitted, Louis XIV of France began expanding his colonial possessions, and he commissioned René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de LaSalle to explore

the region of the Great Lakes. In 1682 LaSalle descended the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico, claimed the vast area drained by the Mississippi in the name of France, and named it Louisiana in honor of King Louis XIV. Two years later he sailed from France to secure a harbor on the Gulf Coast and establish control over the mouth of the Mississippi. However, the mouth of the river had been concealed by mud banks which appeared to La Salle to be rocks. He missed the entrance and died after being shipwrecked in present-day Texas.

Before another expedition could be launched, War between



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"TO PRESERVE THE GENERAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF HANCOCK COUNTY AND TO PRESERVE THE KATE LOBRANO HOUSE AND COLLECTIONS THEREIN; TO RESEARCH AND INTERPRET LIFE IN HANCOCK COUNTY; AND TO ENCOURAGE AN APPRECIATION OF AND INTEREST IN HISTORICAL PRESERVATION."

France and England engulfed Canada. England took Port Royal but was unable to capture Quebec. A young Canadian named Pierre LeMoyne, Sieur d'Iberville distinguished himself in the capture of the British settlements at Hudson's Bay for which he was appointed governor. In 1694 he successfully attacked a superior force of British ships, and the following year he captured Fort Bourbon and further distinguished himself with additional naval victories.

After the Treaty of Ryswick in September 1697, Louis XIV directed his minister of finance, Louis Phélypeaux, Comte de Pontchartrain, to commission d'Iberville to locate the mouth of the legendary Mississippi River immediately and establish a colony there for France to secure the area drained by the river.

**Iberville Departed France**

The French explorers first sailed from La Rochelle, France, on September 5, 1698, but were forced to put into the port at Brest for repairs because one of the ships had begun taking on water. Finally, on October 24 they lifted anchor opposite Brest at seven o'clock in the morning. The flotilla consisted of two frigates, *La Badine*, of thirty guns and two hundred men commanded by Iberville and *Le Marin*, of thirty guns commanded by M. le Compte de Surgere with Iberville's brother, Jean-Baptiste LeMoyne, Sieur de Bienville, aboard. The two main ships were accompanied by two store ships. Aboard these ships were some two hundred colonists, mostly Canadians who had gone to France to assist in her defense. Among them were some women and children. When they arrived at Santo Domingo, they found *Le François* a frigate of fifty guns, commanded by M. le Marquis de Chateau Morant, who was instructed to accompany them.

Iberville's little fleet arrived off the coast of Pensacola on January 26, 1699, and found about three hundred Spaniards building fortifications. The Spanish refused the French ships entry into the harbor but supplied them with requested wood and water.

Subsequently, they proceeded westward along the coastline, arriving off Mobile Bay on February 5. They explored an island on which were strewn the bones of many men who, they assumed, had been killed in battle, but it is more likely they were victims of the yellow fever epidemic which had struck the Indians the previous year. The French called this island, Ile le Massacre (present-day Dauphin Island, AL).

**Iberville Arrived at the  
Mississippi Gulf Coast**

Working their way westward inside the channel islands, the fleet finally arrived at an island they called Ile aux Vaisseaux (Ship Island) on February 10, 1699. On the eleventh and twelfth the adventurers explored the island, taking their cattle ashore to graze. Then they raised the flag of their king and country.

They remained on Ile aux Vaisseaux the following day because of bad weather. On the thirteenth Iberville and his brother Bienville went ashore with a party of thirteen men, sailing due north from the west end of the island. Their landing would have been somewhere between present-day Beauvoir and Edgewater.

The following morning they explored eastward along the beach, following footprints in the sand until they caught sight of three Indians in a canoe leaving Deer Island. Iberville pursued them across Biloxi Bay, catching up just as they reached shore at Ocean Springs. The younger natives fled into the woods leaving an old and dying man. The Frenchmen made him a bed of straw and built



am a fire before withdrawing to make a camp for themselves. Unfortunately, the grasses around him soon caught fire, and though the fires were extinguished, the old man died half an hour later.

Iberville's hunters captured an old woman in the woods and heaped gifts upon her to take to her people. Thus, he first diplomatic contact with the native people had been accomplished, and the Indians told them of the great river to the west.

On February 27 Iberville set out "in wind and drizzle" with Bienville, M. Sauvolle, and about forty-eight men to visit the Mississippi River. They spent the night near the south end of the later named Bay of Saint Louis, and the following day traversed the Breton Sound in fog and rain which continued through the next day. Running before a storm on March 2, they located and entered the mouth of the Mississippi and traveled upstream making contact with various tribes until on March 16 they came upon a decorated pole which marked the boundary between the Houmas and the Bayagoulas tribes. They called the place Red Stick or "Baton Rouge." On the return trip, Iberville discovered the proof he sought in the form of a letter written by Henri de Tonti to La Salle fourteen years earlier. The letter had been left with the chief of the Mongoulachas, who bartered it to Iberville for a few hatchets and knives.

Iberville shortly thereafter divided his party into two groups. The plan was for Bienville to return to their ships, anchored off Cat Island, by the mouth of the Mississippi. Iberville was to explore the area of Pass Manschac, Lake Maurepas, and Lake Pontchartrain and return to the open water by the Rigolets.

Previously, when Iberville had departed from his ships on Feb-

ruary 27, he had instructed his crew to leave for France if he had not returned within one month. On March 30 he camped near the mouth of the Bay of Saint Louis where he built a large fire to signal his return. The following morning he recognized Cat Island and shortly thereafter reached his ships. About an hour later Bienville and his party arrived.

### Construction of Fort Maurepas Begun

Construction was begun on Fort Maurepas on April 8, 1699, and the fort was completed by May 1. Iberville sailed for France on May 3 to report to his king, leaving eighty-one men at the fort. He wrote in his journal, "I left M. de Sauvolle in command; DeBienville, King's Lieutenant; Levasseur, Major; DeBordenac, Chaplain; Care, Surgeon; two Captains, two Pilots, four sailors, eighteen military adventurers, thirteen Canadians, ten mechanics, six masons, thirty sub-officers and soldiers."

### The Bay of Saint Louis Explored

On August 25, 1699, Bienville explored the Bay of Saint Louis. André Pénicault, a ship's carpenter on the expedition, recorded in his journals, "We shortly afterwards found a beautiful bay, about one league in width, by four in circumference, which M. Bienville named the Bay of St. Louis, because it was on the feast day of St. Louis we arrived there. We hunted there three days and killed fifty deer."

The exploration proceeded westward through the Rigolets and as far as the present site of New Orleans. On the return trip Pénicault recorded, "Next day we camped at the entrance of the Bay

of St. Louis, near a fountain of water that flows from the hills, which M. de Bienville named Belle Fontaine. We hunted several days around this bay and filled our boats with venison, buffalo and other game."

J.F.H. Claiborne wrote that Iberville arrived the second time from France with two frigates, the *Renommée* and the *Gironde*, on December 8, 1699, though Richebourg Gaillard McWilliams lists the date a month later. With him was M. de Surgere, bringing supplies and reinforcements, including sixty Canadians.

In December Bienville had a fort constructed on the bluff at the "Baye de Saint Louis" garrisoned with fifteen soldiers and five families under the command of a sergeant. Thus the colony at Bay Saint Louis became the third settlement on the Gulf of Mexico following Pensacola and Biloxi (Ocean Springs). After exploring the Mississippi River again in search of a site for a permanent colony, Iberville hastily selected a site about fifty miles upstream from the river's mouth, and construction was begun on a small fort called Fort Boulaye, or Fort Mississippi.

Iberville departed a second time for France on May 28, 1700, this time leaving 120 men at Fort Maurepas, 140 total between Mobile and Fort Mississippi. When he returned to Biloxi Bay in December 1701, he brought instructions to move the colony to Fort Louis (Mobile Bay) because France had formed an alliance with Spain against England and the new location afforded joint protection against a British attack.

On April 22, 1702, Iberville sailed back to France and never returned. He died aboard a French ship in the harbor of Havana, Cuba, on July 9, 1706. Bienville was only twenty-two years of age when he



became governor of the colony. His capital remained at Mobile until January 1720 when it was moved back to Biloxi because the harbor at Dauphin Island had become too shallow. Construction of Fort Louis at Nouveau Biloxi, however, was never completed, and in 1722 Bienville moved his residence and the capital to New Orleans. After New Orleans became the capital, its deep-water access for shipping rendered the colonies eastward to Mobile of little value to the French.

As a result there was little, save hides and pelts, of commercial value produced in the area, and those were transported to New Orleans for shipping. Hard life and disease left the colony chronically under-populated, and agriculture was never developed. Though several valiant efforts to bring women to the colonies were made, none were totally satisfactory. There were frequent marriages with Indians and later with Negroes. In 1727 the few troops remaining at Fort Louis in Biloxi were withdrawn, and the area was left to fend for itself.

The lifestyle that developed became one of rural peace. During the rest of the 1700's, there was little development of cultural, social, religious, or political organizations. There were no schools, and although the population was exclusively French or Spanish and Catholic, no churches were built. Occasionally an itinerant priest traveled from Natchez, performing marriage and burial rites, often after the fact. The people hunted or fished for food, they dressed and groomed themselves in the fashion of the Indians, and they built their homes of thatch and mud. The settlers were destined to remain much the same for nearly a century.

England defeated France in the Seven Years War, and all of Louisiana west of the Mississippi and the Ile d'Orleans went to Spain.

The total white population of all of Louisiana was only about three thousand. In *The Mississippi Gulf Coast: Portrait of a People*, Charles Sullivan wrote "...the French failed in their attempt to colonize the Gulf Coast because they did not begin by cultivating the soil."

In spite of grand intentions, the Gulf Coast became more isolated, and with the approaching revolution in 1776, the crown ordered the West Florida colonial administration to grant land to the Tories who were forced to flee from other areas of the country. However, France joined on the side of the colonists against England, and many of the long-time settlers in West Florida felt no allegiance to England nor the Revolutionary Colonies.

To compound matters, in June 1779 Spain declared war with Britain, and as a result of the ensuing treaty, British West Florida became Spanish West Florida. Essentially Spanish West Florida included the Florida Panhandle, the lower "heels" of Alabama and Mississippi, and the eastern portion of Louisiana roughly from Baton Rouge south to the mouth of the Mississippi River.

To further compound matters, the Congress of the United States created the Mississippi Territory on April 7, 1798, which included, in effect, all that land presently composing the states of Mississippi and Alabama.

By an act of the Mississippi Territorial Legislature, Hancock County, named for John Hancock, was created as a territorial county on December 14, 1812. The *Code of Mississippi...From 1798 to 1848* as recorded by A. Hutchinson states in Article 15. Jackson and Hancock—Dec. 14, 1812: "All that tract of country lying south of the thirty-first latitude and west of the line running due north and middle of the

Bay of Biloxi to the thirty-first degree of north latitude and east of the Pearl River shall compose a county, and shall be known by the name of Hancock."

Spain moved quickly to recognize the property rights of persons who occupied their holdings in West Florida and who would swear allegiance to the Spanish crown and the Catholic Church. New grants for land were issued freely. Although the Spanish did not send many settlers to the territory, their liberal land policies made it attractive for the settlers already there to remain. In 1803 Napoleon Bonaparte sold the vast Louisiana Territory to the United States. Shortly thereafter, the people living between the Perdido and Pearl Rivers declared their independence from Spain.

President Madison viewed the acquisition of Florida by the United States as inevitable and generally pursued a cautious policy. On the contrary, Americans on both sides of the border were not so complacent. During 1809—1810 events with West Florida as well as those within Spain (Napoleon had installed his brother, Joseph, on the Spanish throne.) gave encouragement of direct intervention by Spain.

The Madison administration permitted Governor Claiborne of the Orleans Territory to offer verbal encouragement to American settlers in the Baton Rouge area, and, reacting to this maneuver the Spanish commandant permitted the inhabitants some degree of self-government in the form of a convention. The Revolutionaries took over the convention and authorized seizure of the fort at Baton Rouge. With arms secured from Mississippians to the north, an insurgent force of eighty men overwhelmed the Spanish soldiers. On September 23, 1810, the convention drew up a Declaration of Independence for the



free and independent Republic of West Florida.

The little country existed in theory, and to some degree in reality, for seventy-four days. Fulwar Skipwith was elected President, and the lone star flag was designated the official flag of the country. (This flag predates the Texas Lone Star flag by twenty-six years.)

President Madison issued a proclamation annexing the region west of the Perdido River to the United States and instructed Governor Claiborne to incorporate the area into the Louisiana Territory.

Prior to the West Florida revolt, the population of the Gulf Coast was sparse. A report in 1804 showed about forty-eight families "eking out an existence." Another account, presumably before the revolt, listed "not 20 families on the east bank of the Pearl, 10 or 15 French families at the Bay of St. Louis, 4 or 5 French free Negroes and mulattos at Pass Christian, where the citizens of New Orleans were beginning to take refuge in the summer, about 12 families at Biloxi, half as many again on the Pascagoula [River], with more living up that river."

The territory was opened to settlers, and in a three year period between 1813 and 1816, thirty-three hundred families came down from Virginia, Tennessee, the Carolinas, and Georgia, all of whom were Anglo-Saxon Protestants. They moved into the coastal areas, overwhelming the French and Spanish Catholic population until they reached the eastern shore of the Bay of Saint

Louis, where the migration ceased. The little town on the western shore of the bay, by that time called Shieldsboro, could be reached overland by carriage or wagon from the east only by traveling north from Pass Christian to Delisle, westward to the Kiln, and finally southward to the town itself. The community remained fiercely loyal to its French and Spanish heritage throughout the 1800's.

It would be years before the first rail would cross the Bay of Saint Louis in 1870 and 112 years before the first automobile bridge was opened in 1928. In a letter written by Governor Adelbert Ames as late as 1878, he stated that the language of the boarding houses and stores in Bay Saint Louis was exclusively French.

On December 10, 1817, the western portion of the Mississippi Territory was admitted to the Union as the state of Mississippi.

On February 5, 1841, the Mississippi Legislature divided Hancock County, cutting a north-south line through the Bay of Saint Louis and creating Harrison County. A later division in 1870 partitioned a portion of northern Hancock County to form a new county called Pearl County.

However, this new county was unsuccessful and was abolished in 1879 with its lands reverting to Hancock County. Because of the large size of Hancock County residents in its northernmost areas disliked the long, exhaustive travel to do business in the county seat of Bay Saint Louis. Therefore, in 1890 the

state legislature partitioned lands from the northern section of Hancock County and southern section of Marion County to create the new Pearl River County. Ultimately all of the land which had been established as the territorial county of Hancock in 1812 was divided into essentially four (or parts of four) present-day Mississippi counties: Hancock, Harrison, Pearl River, and Stone.

In summation, Hancock County was originally settled by the Catholic French and Spanish with Anglo-Saxon Protestants coming in the very late 1700's and early 1800's. The territorial Hancock County was created by a vote of the Mississippi Territorial Legislature on December 14, 1812. The final approval for its formation was made on December 18, 1812.

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